1

Introduction and Overview

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This book reports on social trends among U.S. adults between the early 1970s and the first decade of the 21st century. Its chapters cover social and political phenomena arrayed across a wide spectrum. Some investigate and interpret changes in salient sociopolitical attitudes—regarding tolerance for free speech, black/white relationships, women's roles, politics and government, and crime and its punishment. Others ask whether confidence in major American institutions fell, or if connections to religious groups or other persons waned. Still others study shifts in how adults assessed their well-being as economic, political, and social conditions in U.S. society underwent sometimes-dramatic change.

The 12 studies that follow rest on survey data assembled by the General Social Survey (GSS) project since 1972. The GSS regularly questions representative samples of U.S. adults about their social, political, and economic attitudes, values, self-assessments, and behaviors. As well, it collects extensive background information about demographic and social characteristics that predict differences among Americans. This now-substantial data archive facilitates studies of social trends by ensuring that both measurements and samples are comparable over time. It supports studies of aggregate change, subgroup differences at particular points in time, and variation in trends across important subsets of U.S. adults.[1]

Thousands of social science studies draw on the GSS surveys, examin-
ing point-in-time variations among Americans, patterned change over time,
or both. Many investigate specific but quite diverse subjects; examples in-
clude abortion rights (Hout 1999), participation in the arts (DiMaggio 1996),
conceptions of mental illness (Phelan, Link, Stueve, and Pescosolido 2000),
and work orientations such as organizational commitment (Marsden, Kal-
leberg, and Cook, 1993). A few more comprehensive studies compare and
contrast trends across multiple topical areas. Smith (1990) inventoried hun-
dreds of trends measured by the GSS and other repeated surveys conducted
between World War II and the late 1980s, finding that "liberal" movements
outnumbered "conservative" ones during that period, but also that liberaliza-
tion began to wane after the mid-1970s. Davis (1992) examined 42 trends on
diverse topics tracked by the GSS, suggesting that the later 1980s saw a "lib-
eral rebound." Mitchell (1996) reported trends in numerous GSS survey items
over two decades (1974–1994), with attention to differences between men and
women, blacks and whites, older and younger adults, and the more and less
educated. DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson (1996) asked whether polarization—
that is, disagreement surrounding social issues—grew over time, concluding
in general that it did not (increased contention over abortion rights was an
exception). Indeed, they reported that between-group differences in many
social attitudes shrunk during the late 20th century.

Taken together, the chapters here offer some of the depth of single-topic
studies together with the breadth of omnibus studies like Smith (1990), Davis
(1992), and DiMaggio et al. (1996). The authors situate the trends they de-
scribe within—and interpret their findings with reference to—traditions of
social science scholarship in their subject areas. Their topics cover much of
the range of phenomena the GSS project tracks.

This introductory chapter first provides context for the studies that follow,
drawing on prior research about change in the U.S. social, political, and eco-
nomic landscape since the 1970s. Next comes an overview of this book's con-
tent, including some remarks about related GSS-based trend studies on other
topics. I close by briefly calling attention to the variety of approaches and
explanations that the authors use when offering accounts for the patterns of
change they report. No compact statement about factors that underlie recent
U.S. social change emerges. The extent and direction of trends differ consid-
erably, both within and across topical areas—as is perhaps to be anticipated
for such diverse phenomena.

A Changing U.S. Social Environment

Economic, demographic, political, and cultural conditions provide a back-
drop for the changes in attitudes and behaviors discussed here. Previous
studies portray change in those conditions as revealed by comparisons of

U.S. Census Bureau data over time (e.g., Farley 1996; Farley and Haaga 2005; Fischer and Hout 2006) or by integrating across a variety of archival sources that record developments and events during this period (e.g., Patterson 2005; Wilentz 2008).

In the early 1970s, the United States was emerging from the tumult of the 1960s: the upheavals of the civil rights movement, the optimism and interventionist impulses of Great Society initiatives, and the divisiveness and disillusionment surrounding the Vietnam War (Phillips-Fein 2011). The Watergate scandal and the first oil crisis took place just as the GSS began to follow the attitudes and behaviors of American adults.

Marked changes in the U.S. economy described by Levy (1998) were under way in the early 1970s and continued thereafter. The high productivity increases that fueled rising incomes and standards of living after World War II slowed, as did real wage growth. The poverty rate fell slightly, from 14.3% in 1969 to 10.1% by 1999 (Danziger and Gottschalk 2005, p. 55). Technological change and the onset of international competition, among other factors, contributed to deindustrialization and a loss of manufacturing jobs; employment in services and (later) information industries grew. Many newly created positions placed a premium on higher education—what Levy terms a "skill bias"; wages of well-educated workers rose much more rapidly than did those of others (Danziger and Gottschalk 2005, pp. 64–65). Many other new jobs were poorly paid, lacking health care, pension, and other workplace-linked benefits (Kalleberg 2011). Growing skill differentiation was one element behind a rapid rise in income inequality: Levy (1998, p. 199) reports that the share of income received by the top 5% of U.S. families rose from 15.6% in 1969 to 20.3% by 1996.

Among the most notable economic changes was the rising number of women engaged in paid employment. By 1994, over 75% of women aged 25–54 were in the labor force, compared to just 50% in 1970. During the same period, labor force participation among prime-working-age men dropped by 4 percentage points (Spain and Bianchi 1996, p. 82). The number of two-earner families therefore rose, allowing family incomes to grow despite stagnant wage levels (especially among men) during much of the period. A substantial gender gap in earnings narrowed somewhat during the 1980s, but women's average pay remained substantially beneath men's. Danziger and Gottschalk (2005, p. 67) report that this disparity remained relatively stable after 1993.

U.S. demography, family structures, and living arrangements underwent dramatic change. Birth rates fell from over 3 children per woman at the height of the baby boom years to under 2 by the mid-1980s (Fischer and Hout 2006, p. 66). Falling mortality rates accompanied lower fertility: life expectancy at birth continued its century-long rise, reaching well over 70 by 1988 (Treas and Torrecilha 1995). Together, these changes in vital rates raised the proportion of people in older age brackets and the median age in the U.S. population (Treas and Torrecilha 1995; Fischer and Hout 2006, pp. 63–66).

The same period saw notable changes in family structures and living arrangements. Among the most crucial of these were delays in the age of first marriage and rising rates of divorce (Lichter and Qian 2005). Cohabitation, childbearing outside of marriage, and childlessness rose somewhat (Spain and Bianchi 1996). These changes meant that people were married for less of their lives, leading one analyst to argue marriage became "deinstitutionalized" in the United States (Cherlin 2004). Variety in family structures grew as the number of "traditional" families composed of two married adults with children dropped. Many more adults, especially the elderly, lived alone (Fischer and Hout 2006).

A new wave of immigration commenced while these demographic shifts were under way. The percentage of foreign-born persons within the U.S. population grew from about 4% in 1970 to 11% in 2000 (Kritz and Gurak 2005, p. 269). The new immigrants came largely from Latin America and Asia—over a third of them from Mexico alone—rather than Europe and were typically younger than the native born. Their arrival added notably to U.S ethnic and cultural diversity: Hispanic Americans made up 13% of the U.S. population in 2000, slightly more than blacks (12%). Only 69% of Americans then had European origins, a substantial drop from 88% European in the early 20th century (Fischer and Hout 2006, pp. 25, 36).

Residential trends under way throughout the 1900s continued: population shifted away from the Northeast and Midwest toward the southern and western U.S. (Farley 1996), and suburban places grew. Differences between urban and suburban dwellers generally widened, while regional and rural–urban differences diminished (Fischer and Hout 2006).

One additional—and vital—20th-century sociodemographic trend was a broad expansion in education (Fischer and Hout 2006). Of those turning 21 in 1970, about 85% completed high school degrees; roughly 25% earned college degrees. On average, they completed over 13 years of schooling. These figures represented striking increases over even midcentury educational attainment levels, but they rose little further for cohorts maturing after 1970.

Political historians generally characterize this era as conservative (Wilentz 2008; Phillips-Fein 2011). Between 1969 and 2009, Republicans held the presidency for all but 12 years. Divided government was common, however: Democrats usually controlled Congress. Domestic initiatives were few by comparison with the 1960s, as politicians emphasized limiting rather than expanding government. While few social programs of the 1960s ended, economic policy favored free markets as a means toward economic growth, stressing tax reductions, deregulation, and reduced outlays for social welfare (Levy 1998; Patterson 2005).

Extensive technological changes during this period greatly expanded opportunities for Americans to contact one another (Fischer 2011). A national interstate highway network was completed, and airline travel grew. Access to telephone service broadened, and the cost of long-distance communica-

tion fell very notably. Later, the introduction and subsequent rapid development of new communication modes—cellular telephones, text messaging, electronic mail, and other Internet-mediated interaction—vastly altered the ways in which Americans interact with one another and obtain information.[2]

Much has been written of cultural shifts that took place during this period. A "minority rights revolution" (Skrentny 2002) led to broad diffusion and acceptance of principles of equal opportunity and nondiscrimination. With impetus from the civil rights movement that sought equal rights for African Americans, rights advocates soon extended their efforts to other groups including women, ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, and the disabled.

Some authors wrote of falling civic engagement, loss of community, and a growing "sense of civic malaise" (Putnam 2000, p. 25). Others observed increasing individualism, worrying that aspects of it might be destructive (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton 1985). Still others (Hunter 1991) contended that cultural conflicts became reconfigured as debates between the distinct moral worldviews held by orthodox and progressive partisans. "Social issues," many of them made salient by changes in family structure and formation—e.g., abortion rights, artistic expression, divorce, homosexuality, pornography, school curricula—served as foci for these controversies. Patterson (2005) opines that media attention amplified the volume of these "culture wars" and that liberal positions came to predominate in many of them—although conservative participants articulated their stances vigorously.

The GSS survey data examined in the studies that follow were assembled while these societal changes were unfolding. Those studies trace shifts in how typical American adults viewed some of these phenomena and in how they assessed their lives in light of them. They often indicate that broad statements about social change during this period should be qualified and contextualized.

Changing Attitudes, Connectivity, and Well-Being

The coverage of the GSS is indeed "general." By measuring numerous broadly conceived "social indicators," it facilitates "social reporting" about societal conditions and how they change over periods of time (Land 1983). The GSS's attitudinal and behavioral measures touch on many spheres of life, including work, family, politics, religion, and social life, among others.

The three parts of this book discuss trends in social and political phenomena, social connectedness, and individual well-being, respectively. Chapters in the first part examine changing orientations toward key realms of sociopolitical life, centering attention on survey questions that contrast liberal and conservative conceptions of desirable social states—e.g., greater or lesser tolerance for free expression, a racially integrated society versus one partitioned along racial lines, or more and less punitive stances toward criminals. The second part analyzes changes in individual–society attachments at different

levels—expressed confidence in major social institutions, links with and participation in religious groups, and informal socializing with other persons. The four studies in the final part examine over-time change and stability in subjective well-being—happiness, job and financial security—and in verbal ability.

Liberal and Conservative Movements in Sociopolitical Attitudes

Each of the first five chapters asks whether American adults grew more liberal or conservative in some way during this period. What it means to be "liberal" or "conservative" must be defined before engaging that question. This is not straightforward: Smith's overview study of social and political trends distinguished eight forms of liberalism regarding domestic matters (Smith 1990, p. 480): a "reformist" orientation supporting change in the status quo, a "democratic" impulse toward expanded electoral rights, a "libertarian" stance favoring civil liberties, an "interventionist" position endorsing government regulation, "centralist" advocacy of federal standard setting, a "humanitarian" disposition toward social welfare and caring for the disadvantaged, an "egalitarian" inclination toward equal opportunity and (sometimes) results, and "permissive" tolerance of nontraditional lifestyles and practices.[3]

These distinctions are important because people may be liberal in some domains and simultaneously hold conservative or moderate views in others, as intraparty struggles over political platforms exemplify. Trends in different aspects of liberalism can and do differ. GSS evidence presented in this part reveals relatively steady upward movements in libertarian, some egalitarian, and permissive views. Americans are predominately moderate in some other senses, especially regarding the role of government.

In chapter 2, James A. Davis extends his research on tolerance for nonconformity into the 2000s, following up on one of the very first articles based on the GSS (Davis 1975). Drawing on Stouffer's (1955) conceptualization, chapter 2 defines tolerance as the willingness to accord First Amendment–guaranteed rights of free expression to groups espousing unpopular views (e.g., atheists or racists) or lifestyles (homosexuals). Anchored on Stouffer's McCarthy-era baseline reading, it documents a steady rise in tolerance into the 2000s, but suggests that this may be decelerating. Davis concludes that generally liberal outlooks, not sentiments toward particular "target" groups, underlie rising tolerance. He attributes much growth in tolerance to the replacement of older, less educated cohorts by more recent ones. Because two principal drivers of higher tolerance—education and generally liberal outlooks—have stopped rising, Davis conjectures that tolerance may soon reach a plateau.

Chapter 3, by Lawrence Bobo, Camille Charles, Maria Krysan, and Alicia Simmons, depicts "the real record on racial attitudes" using a wide lens. Recounting results of mid-20th-century surveys as well as trends in GSS data, they show that formal principles of equal treatment (e.g., in schools and employment) came to be widely endorsed. They caution against conclud-

ing that U.S. society became "postracial," however. For example, in the 2000s white Americans remain more apt to attribute negative traits to blacks than to whites, reluctant to support interventions to redress persistent black–white inequality, and highly resistant to "special favors" for blacks. Overall, Bobo and colleagues document rising egalitarianism and dramatic change in some basic assumptions governing black–white relationships, together with little or no growth in reformist and interventionist orientations about racial matters. They highlight numerous "enduring frictions and conflicts that continue to make race such a fraught terrain."

Several previous GSS-based studies (e.g., Brooks and Bolzendahl 2004) revealed increasing acceptance of nontraditional gender roles. Karen Campbell and I build upon and extend these findings in chapter 4. Adults became less predisposed toward a "separate spheres" conception holding that women should specialize in caring for children and households while men predominate in the more public arenas of employment and politics. Most growth in acceptance of broadened women's roles took place by the mid-1990s, however, mirroring trends in women's labor force participation and their representation in political office (see also Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2011). We then illustrate the regional convergence noted by Fischer and Hout (2006), showing that southerners continue to espouse more traditional views about gender, but less so over time.

Apart from greater endorsement of free expression, support for equal treatment by race, and acceptance of a widened scope for women's roles, GSS evidence documents rising tolerance in related domains. In 1990, 40% of adults said they would object if a close relative were to marry a Hispanic American; this fell to 18% in 2004, and to 13% by 2010. The respective percentages questioning a marriage to an Asian American are very similar.[4] Loftus (2001) reports that beginning around 1990, fewer U.S. adults regarded homosexuality as "always wrong." Agreement that "homosexuals should have the right to marry" rose from an estimated 12% in 1988 to 35% by 2004, reaching 47% by 2010. Permissive dispositions toward premarital sex grew slowly after 1972, remaining relatively stable after 1980 (Harding and Jencks 2003).[5]

Greater tolerance for social equality in these respects did not extend to support for government action that would reduce economic inequality, however. Between 1978 and 2010, the fraction of GSS respondents strongly endorsing the proposition that "government ought to reduce the income differences between rich and poor" remained steady at roughly a fifth. A similarly stable but slightly smaller fraction felt strongly that government "should do everything possible to improve the standard of living of all poor Americans."[6]

Jeff Manza, Jennifer Heerwig, and Brian McCabe shift attention to changing orientations toward politics and government in chapter 5. They ask whether conservatism in political affiliations, national spending priorities, and social issue stances grew between 1972 and 2006, in keeping with Wilentz's (2008) label for the period, the "Age of Reagan." Some trends certainly accord with

this image: Discernably more adults described themselves as "conservative" and identified as Republicans. Moreover, conservatives became much more apt to identify as Republicans, and gaps between Republicans and Democrats on some social issues widened, signaling limited rises in some forms of polarization (DiMaggio et al. 1996). Other findings are at odds with claims of a rising conservative tide, however. For example, in most years more adults described themselves as "moderate" than as either liberal or conservative, calling to mind Hunter's (1991, p. 43) caveat that "most Americans occupy a vast middle ground." Public opinion favored spending increases rather than reductions in many domestic arenas, though here as elsewhere Americans were reticent to call for greater government intervention. The overall portrait of political attitude trends that Manza and colleagues present is decidedly qualified and mixed.

Closing this part of the book is James Wright, Jana Jasinski, and Drew Lanier's study of trends in one social issue area, crime and how it should be punished. Calls for "law and order" were common in the 1960s; Smith (1990) found conservative opinion movements in this area, unlike most others. Chapter 6 here asks whether and how crime-related sentiments changed after a general decline in official U.S. crime rates began around 1994. Several attitudes regarding crime became more moderate thereafter: fear of victimization, preferences for increased spending on crime control, and dispositions to punish crimes more severely (including using the death penalty) all fell. Wright and colleagues argue that attitudes and behaviors about crime and punishment reflect moral stances and pragmatic considerations—including personal security—rather than more general political attitudes.

Trends in Confidence and Connections

The three trend analyses in the second part of the book bear on debates over whether Americans grew apart from their society and one another during the decades following the 1970s, as suggested in several prominent works asserting that some form of U.S. decline is under way (Patterson 2005). Social scientists gave special attention to Putnam's (2000) claim that the stock of "social capital" had been depleted. Among the numerous facets of social capital are interpersonal trust, institutional confidence, civic engagement through group memberships and/or political participation, and informal social contacts among persons. GSS data provided a key source of evidence for both Putnam's (1995, 2000) original work and subsequent research about his thesis. Paxton (1999) studied trends in social capital between 1975 and 1994, finding lower interpersonal trust, but no general drop in associational memberships or institutional confidence. R. V. Robinson and Jackson (2001) reported reduced trust levels among generations born after the 1940s.

In chapter 7 here, Tom W. Smith presents a detailed analysis of trends in confidence in 13 major institutional sectors. Confidence moved downward in most (the military is an exception), but Smith's discussion reveals sub-

stantial and important variations on this theme. For most sectors, reductions
were both slight and irregular: only confidence in the press and television
fell steadily. Smith interprets changes in confidence in light of sector-specific
historical events: for example, confidence in political institutions shifts de-
pending on the political party controlling the presidency or Congress, while
confidence in economic institutions rises and falls over business cycles. He
also highlights a "cohort-reversal" pattern that contributes to uneven confi-
dence trends: adults born in and near the baby boom years appear least trustful
of most institutions, while those in both earlier and more recent generations
display more confidence.

U.S. society has long been differentiated along religious lines. Repeated
surveys like the GSS are vital to studying religious affiliations and behaviors,
since U.S. government data sources include no information about them. In
Chapter 8, Mark Chaves and Shawna Anderson examine change in the re-
ligious indicators tracked by the GSS. Many core beliefs and behaviors re-
mained stable between the 1970s and the 2000s, but the authors also detect
several important though gradual shifts. Non-Christians and religiously un-
affiliated persons became more numerous (see also Hout and Fischer 2002)
and the fraction of Protestants waned, so religious diversity rose. More con-
servative Protestant denominations grew at the expense of "mainline" groups.
Chaves and Anderson point to some indications that U.S. religiosity, though
it is still high by international standards, dropped: lower religious participa-
tion, reduced belief in biblical inerrancy, and appreciably less confidence in
religious leaders. Especially notable—and suggestive of some heightening in
religiously based attitude polarization (DiMaggio et al. 1996)—is the closer
coupling between religious involvement and both political and religious con-
servatism during this period.

In chapter 9, Sameer Srivastava and I turn to trends in informal social
connectedness. In recent controversy and debate over this subject, some
studies report contraction in social networks (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and
Brashears 2006), contrasting with others that indicate stability (Fischer 2011).
Our analyses find that the frequency of socializing with relatives, friends, and
neighbors changed modestly, but in different directions. Neighboring exhib-
its the clearest drop, balanced to an extent by recent upward movements in
seeing relatives and friends. Overall, Srivastava and I conclude that no gen-
eral network shrinkage appears to be under way. Socializing trends may re-
flect some restructuring of interpersonal networks, however, as other social
changes proceed—including rising electronically mediated interaction and
residential dispersion.

Stability and Change in Social Indicators

Some roots of sustained programs of repeated social measurement like the
GSS lie in efforts to develop and measure social indicators. Proponents aspire
toward a more comprehensive portrait of societal conditions than important

economic indicators like unemployment rates yield. Some advocates saw social indicators as diagnostic criteria that could aid program assessment or guide social policy; others regarded them as more general tools for the on-going monitoring of social change (Sheldon and Moore 1968). Many official statistics (e.g., crime, mortality, and morbidity rates) were proposed as social indicators. Others suggested perceptual measures to track self-assessed well-being or quality of life (Andrews 1974). Those promoting research programs for measuring social indicators stressed that they should collect data regularly and comparably in order to detect change.

All studies in this book report on social indicators in the broader sense of the term. Those in its final part examine trends—and some notable non-trends—in subjective social indicators. Two chapters focus on self-reported happiness, which—despite extensive economic and demographic change—has remained relatively steady since the 1970s. Another examines trends in perceived economic and employment security, while the fourth analyzes change in adult vocabulary knowledge.

Between 1972 and 2006, general happiness levels among American adults remained quite steady, though a minor drop can be detected. In chapter 10, Glenn Firebaugh and Laura Tach try to account for this stability, given the growth in real family incomes and standards of living that occurred during the era. Several factors—better health, being married, greater education, and higher income—make people happier at any given point in time. Firebaugh and Tach assert, though, that assessments of well-being in societies like the contemporary United States reflect not only absolute levels of living but also comparisons of one's income to that typical in a reference group of peers. Their analysis finds higher happiness among adults whose family incomes are higher than average for their age group at the time, implying that happiness rises only when income increases more rapidly than average.

Michael Hout and Andrew Greeley connect happiness with trends in religion. Chapter 11 draws on meaning-and-belonging theory to deduce that a religious affiliation heightens happiness through participation in collective religious rituals. Attendance and engagement appear key: a merely nominal religious affiliation makes people little happier. Notably, two religious foundations of happiness—affiliation with organized religious groups and attendance at services—have fallen, as Chaves and Anderson's chapter shows (see also Hout and Fischer 2002). Softened religious engagement, then, may contribute to the slight downturn in general happiness. In fact, Hout and Greeley report steady happiness among those who participate frequently in religious services, but falling levels among those who are less involved.

Next, Arne Kalleberg and I consider subjective well-being at work—both perceived security and job satisfaction. Kalleberg (2009) asserts that recent changes in U.S. economic organization made employment more precarious. Here, we find that jobs are viewed as less secure than in past decades, after

we adjust for cyclical variations in unemployment (see Schmidt 1999). Insecurity appears to have grown fastest among the upper socioeconomic groups that historically have been least at risk of job loss. In keeping with happiness trends, though, job satisfaction remained very stable between the 1970s and 2000s. Gains in satisfaction during the course of employment countered lower satisfaction among cohorts of young workers entering the labor force. Present-day workers regard their jobs as less secure, but dissatisfaction need not follow if they regard precarity as a to-be-expected condition of employment.

Sectoral shifts toward a postindustrial economy centered on services and information make verbal skills more important to individuals and society alike. In chapter 13, Duane Alwin and Julianna Pacheco examine trends in adults' performance on a 10-item vocabulary battery administered within the GSS. Measured ability remained relatively steady over time. This stability reflects the confluence of two offsetting trends: lower baseline vocabulary knowledge among adults in post–World War II birth cohorts counterbalances achievement gains attributable to their greater schooling. The intricate analysis here assesses two explanations for apparent cohort-related drops in verbal knowledge—that the GSS vocabulary test became more difficult because its words grew obsolete and that the drops reflect population aging rather than cohort-related differences. Alwin and Pacheco conclude that little evidence supports either account and suggest that vocabulary declines in postwar cohorts reflect their family and school experiences as well as the selective survival of higher-ability adults.

A Note on Accounts for Change

The main object of the analyses here is to present and interpret over-time trends in the phenomena the GSS tracks, but many authors also offer accounts for the patterns of change they report. An accounting framework widely used among social scientists recognizes three distinct sources of change: period-related factors that affect everyone in a population at once, cohort-related ones reflecting generation-specific conditions that induce change via cohort succession, and age-linked change over the life course. Age-related phenomena generate trends when change in a population's age distribution shifts the mix of persons who experience the circumstances common to youth or the elderly.

Several chapters here point to generational or cohort turnover as a driver of change. Cohort replacement combines cohort- and age-related phenomena (Firebaugh 1989) because it simultaneously substitutes someone in a later-born cohort for an exiting member of an earlier one, and a younger person for an older one. Here, Davis finds that cohort replacement yields upward

shifts in tolerance, Firebaugh and Tach observe that it implies a slight decline in happiness, Alwin and Pacheco link it to lower word knowledge, and Kalleberg and I note that it tends to reduce job satisfaction. Several of these analyses find that intracohort change due to aging and/or period-related factors counters differences implied by cohort replacement, so that only modest overall change results. Not all cohort-related trends are steady, as the cohort-reversal pattern noted by Smith illustrates.

Attributing change to cohort replacement does not specify which between-cohort differences in characteristics are behind it. Demographic explanations of change (Davis 2001) attempt this, by introducing individual sociodemographic characteristics that both predict the phenomenon of interest and vary across cohorts. Education is a very important example; Davis finds that between-cohort differences in schooling account for an appreciable portion of the growth in tolerance due to cohort replacement, while Alwin and Pacheco note that schooling is responsible for some cohort-related differences in vocabulary knowledge. Earlier, Davis (1982) pointed to pervasive education-related differences in attitudes and behaviors. Fischer and Hout (2006) presented an extended discussion of the rising salience and consequences of educational differences in U.S. society.

Period-, cohort-, and age-related aspects of change are intertwined with one another, and separating them requires that assumptions about their form be made. For example, Alwin and Pacheco argue that because vocabulary knowledge is acquired first via schooling and then gradually during the life course, it is implausible that some period-related factor would alter the verbal proficiency of all in a population at once. With that proviso, they can readily estimate age- and cohort-related differences. Srivastava and I assume that socializing has relatively smooth associations with the three sources of change and find that age-related differences appear largest.

Many authors here juxtapose attitudinal and subjective trends against contemporaneous demographic data or pertinent objective social indicators. Wright and colleagues find some correspondence between changing attitudes regarding crime and recent declines in official crime rates. Campbell and I observe that trends toward less traditional gender role orientations track changes in women's labor force participation and election to political office. Kalleberg and I note that perceived job insecurity rises and falls with unemployment rates. Steady or slightly declining happiness despite rising living standards provides a point of departure for Firebaugh and Tach.

Somewhat similar are interpretations of trends that reference particular historical events. For Manza and colleagues, election outcomes provide a basis for predicting that U.S. political attitudes and affiliations grew more conservative beginning in the 1970s. Smith concludes that fluctuations in institutional confidence have more to do with sector-specific negative and positive events—e.g., disasters, financial crises, wars, elections, economic cycles, or clergy scandals—than with broader-scope phenomena.

These chapters do not test any comprehensive theory of change, or systematically assess the types of factors that shape the trends studied. They do give more attention to cohort- and period-related phenomena than to age-linked factors. Most authors invoke multiple interpretations, none of which appears to account for change in the full range of topics examined here.

Conclusion

The trend studies in this book depict a changing but complex U.S. social fabric over nearly two generations. Tolerance of free expression, endorsement of principles of equal treatment by race, and acceptance of broadened women's roles rose markedly. Americans evince ambivalence about what role government should play in grappling with social problems, however. A few signs of growing crystallization in social divisions can be seen, but at least within the public at large studied here, middle-of-the road positions generally outnumber extreme ones. Declines in some forms of social connectivity are evident, but these are neither universal nor dramatic. Likewise, notwithstanding some rather substantial change in objective conditions, Americans give relatively steady self-assessments of their well-being.

These findings do not comprehensively portray recent social trends, of course: Many sociopolitical topics and questions are not covered by chapters in this book. Data in the GSS archive bear on many of the latter, including orientations toward the environment, health and medical care, national citizenship, change in family and household structures, sexual attitudes and behavior, media use, and many more. The trend studies included here well demonstrate the value of a sustained, prospectively planned survey data collection program. It observes change as it unfolds, rather than reconstructing it after the fact. Its findings reflect the views of representative cross sections of Americans, not only those who strive to publicize their views or succeed in gaining media attention. Replication of questions over time offers assurance that between-year differences reflect change in the subject of interest rather than variation in measuring devices. Certainly other sources can usefully supplement conclusions that rest on survey data like these, but the analyses based on the GSS archive that follow provide an invaluable perspective on how ordinary Americans viewed their society and lives between the early 1970s and the present.

Notes

1. The appendix to this book describes the study design and research methods used to collect the GSS data. They are available to researchers, students, and the public via several channels indicated there.

2. The GSS does not yet track use of new media on a regular basis, but it did
collect cross-sectional data on Internet and electronic mail use in the early 2000s; see
J. P. Robinson, DiMaggio, and Hargittai (2003).

3. Smith suggested that still other varieties of liberalism apply in the sphere of
foreign affairs, including internationalism, multinationalism, and nonmilitarism.

4. Percentages reported here were calculated from the GSS cumulative file,
available via the Survey Documentation and Analysis site maintained at the Univer-
sity of California, Berkeley (http://sda.berkeley.edu).

5. Not all trends were toward increased permissiveness, however. For example,
just over 70% of adults regarded extramarital sexual relations as "always wrong" in the
mid-1970s, a figure that rose to around 82% in the early 2000s.

6. McCall and Kenworthy (2009) argue that rising inequality does concern
Americans but that they want government to address it via means other than "tradi-
tional redistributive programs."

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